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Swimming With the Biggest Fish Around

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SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS
A Foreign Correspondent's Memoirs From Roosevelt to Reagan.
By Henry Brandon.
Illustrated. 436 pp. New York: Atheneum. $24.95.

By Robert MacNeil

THROUGHOUT American history, European observers have come and gone, tossing off snapshots of America, some brilliant, some malicious. Few have stayed in place long enough to see this country evolving. That is the value of Henry Brandon's subtle and penetrating memoir, "Special Relationships." A veritable mole among foreign correspondents, he burrowed into official Washington for nearly 40 years for The Sunday Times of London. He first came here at the start of World War II, as the flower of American world leadership was budding. Like an avid botanist, he watched it come into bloom and, with some melancholy, saw it begin to wither.

Since Mr. Brandon's employer was British, a parallel and ironic theme is Britain's struggle against its own decline in power, its clinging to the wartime closeness with the United States that is one of the "special relationships" of the title. Mr. Brandon dryly observes British prime ministers pirouetting in and out of Washington, trying to dance the choreography set by Churchill and Roosevelt.

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Ironically, history came full circle. Suddenly Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher were parodying Roosevelt and Churchill: U.S. War Materiel Bolsters Thatcher's Mock-Churchillian Defiance in the Falklands; Thatcher Coaches Reagan on Dealing With the Russians. Britain rediscovered its role as part of Europe just as the United States began to grope for one

Robert MacNeil is a co-host of public television's "MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour." His memoir, "Wordstruck," will be published in the spring.

Mr. Brandon sees a persistent decline in the quality of American leadership and points to the changing role of the press as one cause. The news media are more powerful, "much less awed by authority than they used to be," he writes. Journalists, he says, "have become almost as influential in the development or the destruction of official policy as the executive or the legislature. They have become an arbiter of society, judge rather than commentator, advocate rather than analyst."

A part of the Washington press corps yet still an outsider, Mr. Brandon notes new "pressures for news, for information, for ferreting out official dirt." He think.. the press now has "little tolerance of human shortcomings and fallibility" and that its relationship with government has become so confrontational that the news media are affecting the ability to govern: "Trust in and respect for government have lamentably deteriorated, and this deterioration has made governance even more difficult than it already was."

Mr. Brandon is dismayed by an American system that he says "has to be whipped into a frenzy to make it work." He is horrified by what he sees as an irrational element that occasionally grips American policy makers, for instance the members of the China lobby, "whose passionate belief in the Nationalist Chinese regime," he writes, "surpassed their American patriotism" after World War II. He believes that "fear of communism . . . remains a latent threat to the balance of the American cast of mind." He speculates that both the Korean and the Vietnam wars might have been avoided had Truman recognized Communist China when Britain did in 1949.

WHAT gives "Special Relationships" its spice as well as its authority is how close Mr. Brandon got to so many of the people who shaped postwar policy and society, American and British. He ate, partied, visited, holidayed, played tennis and swam with the biggest fish around: Dean Acheson, Anthony Eden, Harold Macmillan, John F. Kennedy, Walter Lippmann, Henry Kissinger. Mr. Kissinger and President Kennedy were close friends of his. Others, like Henry Luce, Richard Nixon, George F. Kennan, John Foster Dulles and Allen Dulles, apparently found Mr. Brandon irresistible as a confidant. For collectors of Washington anecdotes, this book is a feast.

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Allen Dulles, the Director of Central Intelligence in the Eisenhower years, confided to Mr. Brandon that as a young diplomat in Bern he was too busy playing tennis to meet a "bearded fellow whose name was Lenin," three days before he returned to Russia. Dulles's dour brother, John Foster, asked by the author what he thought about position papers prepared by Secretary of State Acheson, his then boss, suddenly hurled a stack of them into the air and said, "Words, nothing but words!" The imperious Acheson, who was refused a martini before lecturing at the dry Brookings Institution, said, "No martini, no lecture." He got the martini. Senator John Kennedy mortified a flat-chested dinner partner by loudly remarking on the more generous endowments of another guest.

But these are not the jottings of a social butterfly playing at journalism. Born in Czechoslovakia, a naturalized British citizen, Mr. Brandon brought to diplomatic correspondence a shrewd European eye, a sophisticated nose for politics, a gift for language. He practiced a special form of interpretive journalism that often became part of the diplomatic dialogue between Washington and London: an idea would be floated in the press on this side of the Atlantic and then reacted to on the other.

Mr. Brandon records one final "special relationship" — his love affair with this country and Washington. His feelings were certainly not unrequited. The American Establishment warmly reciprocated and valued his judgment — to such an extent that he was even asked to join the Committee on the Constitutional System, which was set up to suggest reforms of the Constitution in preparation for its bicentennial this year. Yet, however fond of America he is, Mr. Brandon's value is that he sees this country through a different prism.

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